

## AIDS conference outlines ministry to modern outcasts

By Teresa A. Parsons

Clergymen and church workers can help suppress hysteria surrounding Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) by educating themselves and members of their church communities, said speakers at a diocesan-sponsored educational conference on the disease Wednesday, Dec. 18, at the Pastoral Center. Co-sponsored by the diocesan divisions of Urban Services, Education and Social Ministry, the conference was offered in two sessions, which drew nearly 60 people.

Speakers addressing the epidemiology of AIDS were Dr. James Hubuchon, director of blood services for the American Red Cross; Dr. Robert Betts, professor at the University of Rochester Medical School and chairperson of Infection Control; Jackie Nudd, executive director of AIDS Rochester, discussed the psycho-social issues raised by AIDS and described local resources and support networks for victims. Dr. Karen Bell of the Monroe County Department of Health and Dr. I. Robert Wood, director of clinical services, examined the public health implications of the disease, and Father Daniel Tormey, director of the Department of Chaplaincy Services at Strong, described the pastoral implications. A question-and-answer period was scheduled at the end of each session.

"The comments we've received have been very positive," said Father John A. Firpo, diocesan director of Social Ministry and an organizer of the conference. "We hoped to get information out, to dispel some of the myths, to communicate what the Church can do to provide proper education."

Doctors and health officials reiterated that the virus linked to AIDS — human T-lymphotropic, type III or HTLV-III — has not been transmitted by casual contact, but only by direct blood-to-blood or semen-to-blood contact, such as occurs in sexual contact, by sharing hypodermic needles or in transfusions of blood or blood components that contain the virus. Unlike most communicable diseases, AIDS is not transmitted through sneezing, coughing, eating or drinking from common utensils or being near an infected person.

Like leprosy in biblical times, however, AIDS has created an atmosphere of unreasoning fear during the five years since it was recognized.

"Leprosy and AIDS have often been thought of analogously, but also erroneously," Father Tormey said. "Leprosy in those days (biblical times), arising out of so much ignorance and being thought of as so highly contagious, produced in the popular mind great fear. In that sense, it (AIDS) is very much the modern leprosy — that in our

time it creates a group of outcasts."

Besides being educators of their congregations, ministers and clergy are also called upon to minister to these "outcasts" as well as their families.

"These are people who basically feel they have been sentenced to death ... and for them there is at this time no hope for their recovery," Father Tormey said. As a group, AIDS victims are young and tend to have a large percentage of friends who have either died or are also dying, he added.

In offering pastoral counseling to an AIDS victim, ministers must be prepared to confront the fear that the disease is God's punishment. "An AIDS patient often is overwhelmed with an enormous sense of guilt, not only in terms of lifestyle, but also because for many of them, it's a question of 'Have I infected other people?'" Father Tormey said.

He also warned that AIDS patients frequently react suspiciously to Church representatives. "These are often people who haven't felt comfortable in church surroundings for a long time ... they have been rejected by the Church for a long, long time," he noted. "They may ask 'Why are you coming now that I'm dying when you never wanted to find your way to me when I was alive and healthy?'"

"Alienation from their families, from

society and from the Church is an important spiritual aspect of the suffering they undergo," Father Tormey added.

As executive director of AIDS Rochester, Jackie Nudd and a network of volunteers provide support locally for AIDS victims and their families. She said that as they face death, AIDS patients in many cases are seeking reconciliation, and their families are seeking spiritual guidance. The consequences can be devastating when they turn to a clergyman who lacks an understanding of their ordeal. She cited one instance in which a priest refused to come for counseling to the home of a family he'd known for many years, after a member of that family was diagnosed with AIDS.

"If the Church doesn't understand, it can't respond," Nudd said. "There's no other disease where the sick person is blamed for his disease."

Beyond counseling, Nudd said church congregations could assist AIDS victims with emergency housing and medical care needs.

Father Tormey suggested that in defining a pastoral approach to AIDS victims and their families, ministers should first examine their own attitudes toward AIDS.

"Are you comfortable dealing with the gay community? Are you nervous about contagion or about what people will think of you if your efforts in ministry are focused on gays and people with AIDS?" he asked.

Contrasting the restrictions placed on lepers in the Old Testament with the personal way Jesus approached them, Father Tormey described his own view of a pastoral approach as "one of personal affirmation, one of reconciliation when it is necessary and ultimately, one of healing, medically and in many other senses ... I think that faithfulness on the part of all of us as representatives of the Church community or as representatives of the Lord who reached out and touched the outcasts of His society ... (is) the essence of the pastoral approach."

### AIDS virus appears rarely in saliva

Boston (NC) — The AIDS virus appears rarely in the saliva of infected persons, so there is little chance that contact with their saliva represents a serious hazard, said a group of Boston medical researchers.

Researchers at Massachusetts General Hospital published their findings last month in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

They said the results supported health guidelines suggesting that healthy persons are not endangered by casual, non-sexual contact with victims of AIDS, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.

Dr. Martin S. Hirsch, a member of the team, said that if AIDS were ever transmitted through saliva, it would be "very rare."

The researchers tested the saliva of 71 homosexual men who had antibodies showing they had come into contact with the AIDS virus. They found the virus in only one saliva sample.

When they tested the blood of 50 homosexual men with AIDS antibodies, the virus was found in 28 of the samples.

Worries by parishioners about the possibility of AIDS transmission by saliva led two Catholic parishes in Ohio to stop using a common Communion cup this fall. The U.S. bishops' liturgy committee sought an opinion on the question from the national Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. The CDC responded that it could not absolutely rule out all risk, but it had no evidence of AIDS being contracted through any sharing of utensils, such as drinking from a common cup.

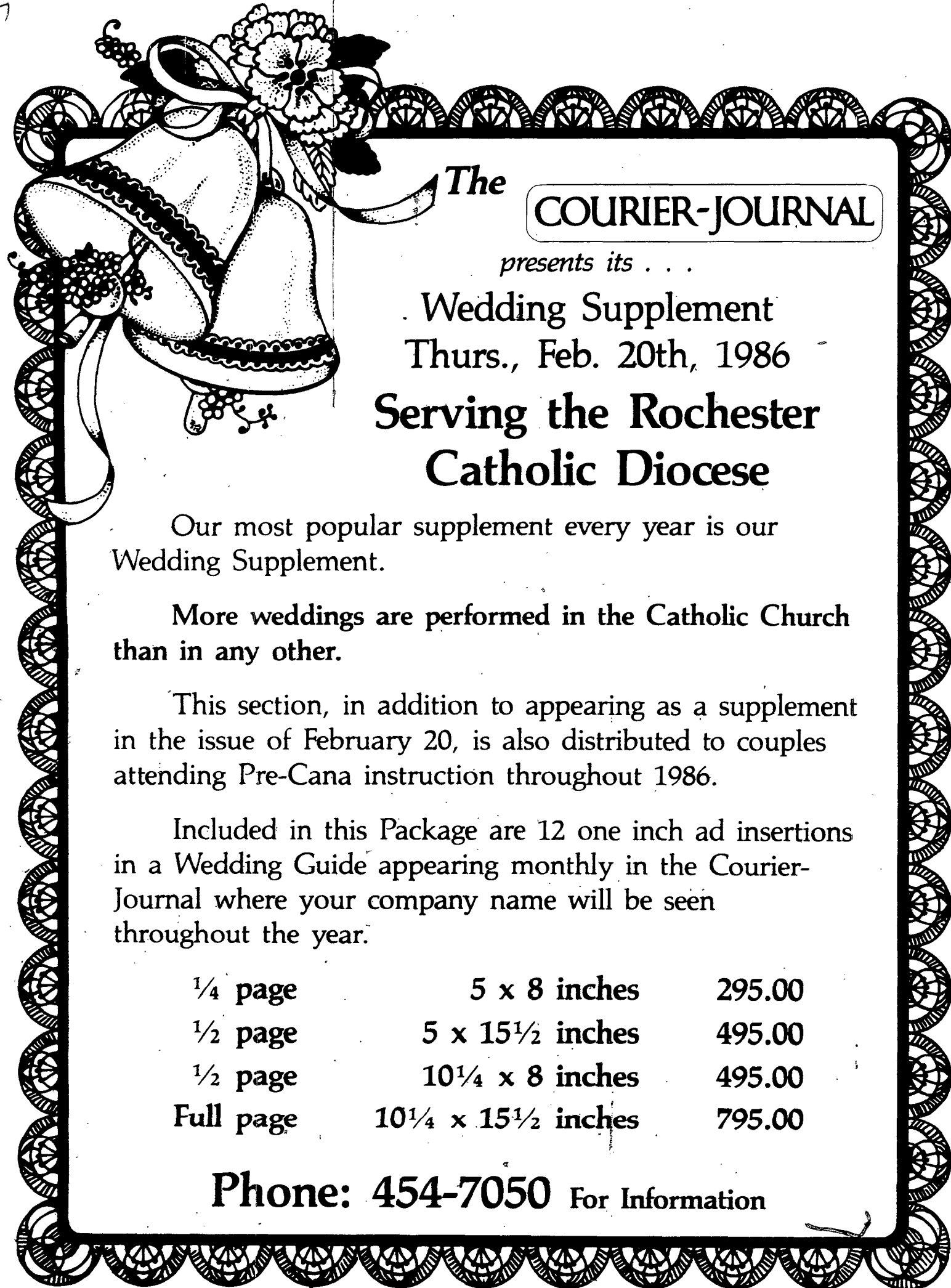
The liturgy committee issued a statement on December 6 saying that concern over AIDS or other communicable diseases should not cause parishes to stop making the Communion cup available.

The committee suggested intinction, or the dipping of the host into the cup, as a possible alternative to communicants drinking from the cup. It also said pastors should advise those who are fearful that they can receive Communion under the species of bread alone.

### Pastoral Musicians Meet

The Rochester Chapter of the National Association of Pastoral Musicians will meet Tuesday, Jan. 14, at 7:30 p.m. in St. Louis Church, Pittsford.

"Folk groups and choirs working together" will be the topic with presenters Bea Hack, music coordinator at St. Louis, and John Kubiniec, associate director for liturgical music in the Office of Liturgy. Call (716)328-3210 for more information.



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